

Life Issues After the Election

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin made many important points in his Oct. 25 address at the Woodstock Forum of Georgetown University. Speaking on "Religion and Politics: Stating the Principles and Sharpening the Issues," he re-emphasized his commitment to a consistent ethic of life, to a "seamless garment" approach to the whole spectrum of life-and-death issues that the nation faces today. Toward the end of his speech, he made one particular point that deserves special emphasis:

"The issues of religion and politics, theology and policy, public morality and personal choice will be with us long after the current election is over. Elections are wonderful and necessary events in the democratic process. However, they are not well suited for producing reflective ideas or careful distinctions. The questions which have run through this election—about the role of religion in our public life, the relations of political responses to moral issues—are broader and deeper than election politics can handle.

"Solid answers to them will require reaching beyond politics to universities, research centers, libraries, churches and synagogues. I hope our Catholic universities will take the challenge seriously. I know the bishops will remain in the public debate, and we need help. Public officials will remain in the line of fire, and they need help. Citizens will ultimately make the difference, and they need the aid of institutions to advance the dialogue about conscious choices and deliberate policies on a range of issues."

It would indeed be unfortunate if the very profound issues concerning public policy, morality and religion were to drop from view now that the campaign is over. Some quietus, of course, is altogether appropriate, both for the sake of well-earned recreation and for the sake of much needed reflection. The nation should enjoy Thanksgiving, Christmas and Chanukah. But we should not wait another four, or even two, years before returning to the questions that the campaign dramatized but did not answer.

Drawing deeply on the writings of John Courtney Murray, S.J., Cardinal Bernardin underlined the importance for future discussions of "the way we conduct our debate." Civility, in the sense of mutual respect and mutual commitment, is indispensable for fruitful discussion in a pluralistic society. Moreover, there is a legitimate secularity in the political process, just as there is a legitimate role for religious and moral discourse in shaping public policy. The dialogue must be "a careful conversation which seeks neither to

transform secularity into secularism nor to change the religious role into religiously dominated public discourse."

As the Cardinal noted, religiously rooted positions can win acceptance as public policy in a religiously pluralistic society only if those positions rest on moral foundations generally acceptable within the society. One of the most important tasks facing our nation is the creation of a moral consensus on the value of human life at all stages of its existence. The creation of that consensus demands both a new style and a new substance in the public debate.

The new style must respect the complexity of the public policy issues on abortion, poverty, the arms race and the other areas in the life-and-death spectrum. The new substance must recognize the analogical connections among the issues of war, poverty and abortion. "I am more convinced than ever," the Cardinal stated, "that the ethic of the seamless garment is the best analytical setting in which to develop a posture in defense of human life." This analytical framework forces the public to face the full range of threats to life.

Cardinal Bernardin criticized the Religious Right for failing to recognize the complexity and the secularity of the public debate and for failing to situate the abortion question within the wider framework of respect for life on many fronts. He also emphasized the importance of helping the American people to "see" the human beings, born and unborn, who need their help and cannot survive without it. The public must come to realize that the statistics on abortions and poverty are real and that the people behind them are real. As long as the numbers stay numbers, the defenseless remain defenseless.

Archbishop John J. O'Connor of New York and the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame have called for the initiation of a national dialogue on steps to restrict the present policy of abortion on demand. Cardinal Bernardin endorsed that proposal and "the search for what is possible and most effective in the civil arena."

Cardinal Bernardin has accurately assessed the task that lies ahead. Politicians and preachers need to reconsider both the style and substance of their arguments. Everyone concerned with public policy, including the universities and the media, must help the public to a clearer vision of the "seamless garment" of human life.

